

Assistant Secretary Christina Rocca
Statement on Southern Asia Earthquake-U.S. Relief and Assistance
Asia and Pacific Subcommittee Hearing
Thursday, October 20, 2005
1:30 PM
Room 2172 Rayburn Building

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting us here today to discuss the U.S. response to the tragic South Asia earthquake and its aftermath. I have appeared before this committee several times to talk about the importance of this region to the United States, about the strong partnerships we are building with its governments and its people. So you will be proud to know that in the immediate aftermath of this terrible tragedy, the United States took immediate action to support our friends' urgent humanitarian needs. Today, nearly two weeks after the earthquake we can see that the magnitude of their need has yet to be fully realized and much needs to be done.

The Government of the United States and the American people are responding generously in support of those suffering the effects of the earthquake. And we will be with them through this challenge. We are providing funds for rescue and relief to both Pakistan and India. We are providing urgently needed transportation and material support to the Government of Pakistan. We are mobilizing the private sector to provide additional leadership and support to address the many pressing needs faced by victims. In the days ahead, we will urge the international community to join us in support of the earthquake's victims and we will be vigorously engaged at next week's U.N. meetings in Geneva. There is much that the United States can contribute, but we cannot do it all ourselves.

Mr. Chairman, let us briefly review what has taken place to date. Current estimates of the death toll from the October 8 earthquake are nearly 42,000 people dead and 70,000 injured. There is a grave risk now that the devastation left by the earthquake will be compounded as the weather turns bad. Winter is now arriving and bringing snows to the high mountain regions affected by the earthquake; the weather is already deteriorating and we are in a race against time. Over 3 million people are estimated to have been left homeless and without shelter to protect them from the rapidly deteriorating weather – a second wave of deaths could occur if efforts are not stepped up immediately.

The United States has been out front leading the international community by providing transportation assets, food, medicine, shelter, equipment, and disaster

management expertise. Within hours of the earthquake, U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Ryan Crocker mobilized our government's efforts to help. Our government has stepped forward with a contribution of 50 million dollars in humanitarian assistance. On-the-ground assessments are ongoing and the US will participate at next week's donor conference hosted by United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan in Geneva.

The U.S. rushed helicopters to Pakistan. At the moment there are 12 U.S. military helicopters operating there, including heavy-lift twin-rotor Chinooks, available to move supplies, help with evacuations, and establish contact with remote areas needing assistance. More of our helicopters are on the way. We are also responding to the urgent need for winterized tents and blankets, food, medicines, water purification equipment and earth moving equipment.

On October 12, Secretary of State Rice traveled to Islamabad to meet with President Musharraf and Prime Minister Aziz in order to personally convey the great sympathies of the American people and to determine what more the U.S. could do to help Pakistan in its hour of need. President Bush is also personally engaged on the issue and invited the Pakistani Chargé to the White House to discuss the situation the day after the quake; the President also visited the Pakistan Embassy in Washington last Friday to sign the condolence book. On the day of the quake itself the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad gave \$100,000 in emergency relief and five helicopters from the Department of State's INL-GOP joint Air Wing began flying the first rescue operations and transporting relief supplies to the affected areas.

With India, the Secretary also called the Indian Foreign Minister to convey our sympathies with all those affected. And there also, the Embassy immediately contributed \$50,000 to the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund and \$50,000 to Save the Children. We are working quickly to provide significant additional assistance to NGOs amounting to several hundred thousand dollars. Additional U.S. Government support, especially to NGOs established on the ground in J&K, would help meet the urgent needs of affected communities and would demonstrate U.S. commitment and solidarity with those impacted by the earthquake. We have asked the government if there are other ways we can be of assistance.

This can be a significant moment for the relationship between India and Pakistan. We have seen Pakistanis and Indians working together to provide help to victims in Kashmir. The historic talks between the governments of India and Pakistan over the past year and a half, laid the groundwork for the trust that would

allow this level of cooperation. The governments of both Pakistan and India have found the political will to allow the people of Kashmir ready access to their relatives on either side of the Line of Control and to take measures which help the humanitarian crisis faced by this area. We of course strongly support these gestures and hope they will lead to increased long term cooperation between both nations. There are those who are cynically using the situation to conduct violent terrorist acts as demonstrated by the assassination of the Jammu and Kashmir State Education Minister Gulam Nabi Lone. This is unacceptable. The real battle going on in Kashmir today, and for the foreseeable future, will be to save the hundreds of thousands of innocent lives and overcome a natural disaster the likes of which this region has never experienced.

As you have seen on your television screens, the mountainous terrain has made it extremely difficult to reach the affected areas. Weather and landslides have blocked access to remote villages worst hit. Thunderstorms, wind and fog have made helicopter access impossible and efforts to clear roads more dangerous and complicated. The threat of death by exposure adds to the suffering caused by the earthquake. The winding mountain roads that cling precariously to the hillsides in the best of times have, in many instances been obliterated by mud and rock slides. They will need to be rebuilt with heavy equipment, equipment that is sorely needed in the towns and cities to recover those buried beneath the rubble. In short, the infrastructure of an entire region – hospitals, schools, water systems and wells, government buildings – is in ruins.

The U.S. will continue to take a leading role in the international effort to save lives in South Asia. Seventy-six countries and major international entities from Azerbaijan to the UK, including NATO, the EU and the United Nations are stepping up to contribute to this effort.

Mr. Chairman, the Administration looks forward to working with you and the committee as we move forward expeditiously to help the people of the affected areas. People are suffering and the American people are responding – demonstrating the depth of our commitment to our friends in the region and revealing to the world the character of our great country.